

Bloodsong of Wycaro

EXCLUSIVE EXCERPT

FROM BESTSELLING AUTHOR
CAROL STURKA

PLURIBUS
STREAMING ON

The background of the cover is a detailed illustration of a woman with long, flowing red hair, wearing a dark, buttoned coat over a gold-trimmed garment. She is looking upwards and to the right. The setting appears to be the rigging of a ship, with ropes and wooden structures visible. The overall tone is dramatic and historical.

**BLOODSONG
OF WYCARO**

— a *Winds of Wycaro* novel —

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Carol Sturka



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A Letter from the Author

Avast Wycarians,

Carol here, finishing up the final leg of my *Bloodsong of Wycaro* tour. It's been a blast, and I thank you all!

However, I've noticed there's one thing you're dying to know. From Dallas to Detroit to Des Moines, the same question follows me. It's not "Carol, you pepper in a lot of references to Greek mythology. What is your favorite myth and why?" (I'm partial to the tale of Sisyphus... I know many of you are fellow writers, so I think no explanation is necessary.)

No, instead many of you seem upset – nay, distraught – nay, outraged – by one particular detail regarding *Bloodsong*. **“Raban’s not on the cover! He’s never not been on the cover!”** The “Raba-

sia” Shipper community is in an uproar. Some of you say you won’t even buy the book due to Raban’s absence.

You guys! You must read the book!

Listen, I feel your pain. But the last time we saw Raban in *Stormshadow* he had been ordered by Lucasia to walk the plank, which is certainly an experience not many people survive. Given that tragic fact, would it even make sense for him to be on the cover?

Bloodsong is a treatise on heartbreak and grief. You know I am on record for despising “spoilers” in any form, that my preference would be to let events unfold in their own time through Lucasia’s anguished eyes. But I also understand that’s not everyone’s preference.

Different strokes for different folks. How hellish would the world be if we all thought exactly the same?!

Both my manager and agent think I have lost my mind, but I’m going to do something that is anti-thetical to capitalism: give my work away for free. A bit of it, anyway. I say this with love: I am honestly getting a bit exhausted by this cyclocane of emo-

tion. Some people like to eat their dessert first, I guess. If you're one of them, the following sneak peek is for you. But if you're True Purple, a Wycarian through and through – then hopefully you've already bought a copy of the book and are reading it front to back, the way Aurora intended it.

Chapter Sixteen, “The Isle of Sanantes.” Will it have the same impact on its own as it would had you read the previous two hundred-and-thirteen pages of *Bloodsong*? Certainly not. But if you insist on beginning with your hot fudge sundae, who am I to stop you?

Keep the winds at your back,

A handwritten signature in black ink on a white rectangular background. The signature reads "Carol Sturken" in a cursive, flowing script. The first name "Carol" is written with a large, looped 'C' and the last name "Sturken" follows in a similar cursive style.

Chapter Sixteen: The Isle of Sanantes

Lucasia knew she would not slumber tonight. The angry moonsburn creeping up her forearms and hands was excruciating. To think, scant seconds under the emerald light of the twin moons had brought this wrath upon her. Before The Sickness, she was able to bask freely in the radiant glow of the moons, resplendent in their luminosity.

Now, she could not go on deck unprotected for even an instant – none of her crew could. Beneath her cracked and scarlet skin, her every nerve was on fire. Each spark of pain was so fierce that waves of nausea overcame her, much like the purple waves she could hear portside, slapping against the *Mercator*. She lurched from her bed to the cupboard. Aurora willing, there would be a bucket, a boot, anything to keep the floor of her captain's quarters

unsullied. She rummaged desperately, digging out an old pail. Without a moment to spare, she retched.

Eventually, this harsh action brought respite. As Lucasia composed herself, a glimmer caught her eye. In the back of the cabinet, hidden behind the fernweh powder and byrnem leaves was a glass jar, half full of a deep blue ointment. She tenderly unscrewed the top. The thick, fruity scent of macerated berries wafted through the air. The aroma immediately brought her back...

The day after the terrible Battle of Nepenthe. She woke in a haze to Raban undressing the bandage on her shoulder.

“What are you doing?!”

From his pocket he withdrew a small jar, presenting its cobalt-colored contents.

“This, ma chérie, is salve from the waldoneve berry. It will soothe your wounds.”

Raban rubbed the salve between his rough hands, warming it. The sweet, jammy smell drifted languidly around the cabin, calming Lucasia with memories of

childhood, before her life had become so unwieldy, so raw. He placed his slippery hands on her shoulder.

“Hell’s alarum, it stings!” she exclaimed.

“For things to heal, they must first hurt, ma chérie.”

Lucasia dipped her fingers into the jar and scooped a dollop of the ointment onto her moonsburn. The cooling salve immediately stung, a prickle of knives that was almost unbearable. It began to melt, a deep blue against the rash red of the burn. She rubbed it into her skin, ignoring the pain, willing herself to continue as Raban had, as if she could somehow bring him back by repeating his actions. The waldoneve tingled as it spread its healing properties. If only there were a salve for a broken heart...

Suddenly there came a knock at the door, ripping Lucasia from the sweet embrace of the past.

“Who goes there?!” she roared.

“O’Riordan, my Captain,” responded a voice as weathered as the sand-grooved figurehead at the *Mercator’s* bow.

Granted entrance, the burly deckhand stepped through the doorway shrouded in sailcloth, not a single pouce of his skin exposed to moonlight. He

unwrapped the heavy fabric covering his head, revealing a ruggedly handsome face with eyes as green as the twin moons. Had illness not befallen the crew, and had Lucasia not been so afflicted by moonsburn, she might just have taken temporary harbour in his strong arms.

“Captain, Peregrina requests your presence in the chart room.”

“Aye, what seems to be the problem?”

“The storm troubles her, Captain.”

As if to emphasize Peregrina’s concern, the ship listed as a duneswell struck its side.

Lucasia couldn’t ignore her trusty navigator’s apprehension. Dismissing O’Riordan, she moved to her bed, on which Raban’s topcoat was strewn. She picked it up and buried her face in the folds of fabric, searching for his scent. There was barely any left. She draped the coat over her torrent of crimson hair, a makeshift shield against the pale, murderous light of the twin moons. Thus protected, she ventured from her quarters.

~

“This is madness, Captain!” was the greeting Lucasia received as she entered the forecastle.

Lucasia smirked at Peregrina as she doffed her topcoat. Her old friend was as frank as she was faithful.

“Stand fast, Navigator. We have suffered tempests before.”

“We cannot make the Isle of Sanantes. Over half our crew have taken to their bunks – trouble enough if this were merely a squall. But now a cyclocane is inbound from the Gulf of All Sighs, accruing speed and strength by the minute. We must find refuge at the nearest port.”

Lucasia eyed Peregrina. She looked worse for the wear. Bags sagged beneath the tired navigator’s eyes. A half-emptied glass sat beside a sextant and azimuth, violetienne liquor rocking back and forth within it.

“Peregrina,” Lucasia calmly began. “I know there is a storm bearing down on us. I know the crew is sick, exhausted, and afraid.”

Lucasia eased closer to the oaken table. Peregrina stared down at her charts in silent desperation as sand pounded against the portholes.

“I also know that medical miracles abound on Sanantes. There is no other port for us.”

Peregrina laughed, a scared yet cruel laugh.

“Oh, Lucasia. You can’t seriously believe those tales told by wily beggars.”

Lucasia focused her steely gaze on the navigator. Peregrina averted her eyes, ashamed of her overreach.

“I must believe them, Perrie. I have heard tell of a healer banished to the isle. Her name is Madam Asclepius.”

At that, Peregrina snorted.

Lucasia took a purposeful step toward her.

“She is our crew’s *only* hope. We will risk the storm or perish trying, as we no doubt will perish without her help.”

Peregrina opened her mouth to object. Lucasia sternly cut her off.

“That’s an order from your captain.”

~

Topside, Lucasia watched her diminished crew struggle to batten down the hatches. Gouts of amaranthine sand swept across the timbers. Gusts bel-

lowed, knocking the usually resilient deckhands off their feet. The slipsand battered them so hard, it threatened to tear holes through the sailcloth enrobing their bodies. With all her strength, Lucasia held tight to the railing, lest she be blown away like a dry leaf by the cyclocanic gale.

“Avast! Keep eye of your sailcloths!” she shouted to her crew.

The clouds were heavy with rain. Now and again, a thin beam of moonlight would peek through, as if it were a baleful green weed sprouting between cobblestones.

Lucasia fought her away across the deck. The wind did its utmost to push her back – but no storm could ever be a match for her resolve. Through the ache of her heart, the fire of the moonsburn, and the sting of the slipsand, she climbed the steps and took her rightful place at the helm of the *Mercator*.

~

It was only a few capricious hours later that the Master of the Watch spotted land – though for the crew, it had felt like days. The storm persisted as

Lucasia climbed aboard the pinnacle. Peregrina and four stout matelots manned the block and tackle.

“I’m sorry we couldn’t get closer, Captain,” Peregrina shouted over the wind. “The slipsand is too rough to anchor near shore. There may be jagged rocks within the sands. When should we expect your return?”

Lucasia drew Raban’s topcoat tighter around her. Despite her practical nature, Lucasia found herself secretly wishing it might somehow imbue her with his strength.

“When I have obtained a cure. Only then.”

Peregrina and the men lowered the pinnacle into the raging dune-surf. Before the storm could take the wee launch and tear it asunder, Lucasia began to row for shore.

She rowed until her hands blistered and ached. She dared not stop for fear the cyclocane would whip her away in its whirling tempest. At long last, the pinnacle hit land. Lucasia slipped onto the isle and moored the tender to a large stone.

She trudged across the inky landscape of Sanantes. She could barely make out the island’s form through the dense airborne sand. Each step

was a battle. *Could she even trust she had made it to the hallowed isle? Was her mind as well as her body falling to the curse?*

The wind blew so fiercely that her footsteps disappeared even as she lifted her boots from the thirsty grasp of the earth. Lucasia had been walking for leagues, yet there was nary a soul to be found. Her mind went to dark places she had previously refused to countenance. *Was this healer just a myth? A story told by desperate pirates seeking an imaginary panacea?*

Beneath her feet, the terrain began to change from moors caked with violet sand to sharp, volcanic rock. She carefully traversed the craggy landscape. Should she fall now in the middle of nowhere, she would certainly not be found...which would spell death not only for her, but for the entire crew of the *Mercator*.

Despite the difficulty, despite the danger, she had to trek on – if not for herself, then for the men and women who placed their trust in her. She was their captain, and would not fail them.

Now, in the flickering distance, at the foot of what appeared to be a dark mountain, Lucasia spied a

darker smudge. A mirage, perchance? She forced herself forward, setting her sights on it. No. It was a *cavern!*

She entered and collapsed, unable to will her body further. She rested against the cool wall of the cave, catching her breath.

A reedy voice emanated from the gloom.

“What foolhardy soul braves this foul tempest in search of my services?”

Lucasia breathed a sigh of relief. She had found Madam Asclepius.

~

The healer towered over Lucasia. She cut a tall, imposing figure. Vials dangled from the necklaces adorning her protruding collarbones. Her wild hair was pulled back into a knot, a kerchief of woven gouldsbane holding the strays.

Lucasia looked up at her in astonishment.

“You exist.”

The striking healer nodded.

“Aye, that I do. Though I can barely say the same of you.”

Lucasia slowly pushed herself upright, bracing against the cavern wall behind her. Her legs trembled with weakness, as if she were balancing on two miaphine stalks. Madam Asclepius observed her, sizing up her shaking limbs, fatigued eyes, and fiery hands. She searched within her necklaces, opening and smelling the different vials.

“Yes, this one,” she said, handing Lucasia a vial of smoking liquid. “Drink it.”

Lucasia downed the elixir in one gulp. Within moments, her legs strengthened and she could stand without effort.

Madam Asclepius arched a razor-thin eyebrow. “Better?”

Lucasia nodded with gratitude. She handed the empty vial back to the healer, who pocketed it.

“That’s all I can do for you.”

With that, Madam Asclepius turned her back, striding into the stygian depths of the cave as Lucasia stumbled after her.

“You don’t understand, I need your help. A curse has befallen my ship. My crew lies paralyzed in their hammocks. They are haunted by visions of death and destruction. We cannot venture into the light of

the twin moons lest our skin burn and boil. It is driving my men mad. We have already lost four lives.”

“Sorry. You should have gotten here yesterday. Tonight, I have a patient whom I must tend.”

Madam Asclepius kept a brisk pace to the far end of the cavern, which was lit by candlelight. In a corner, Lucasia could make out a bed. It was occupied.

“I will pay any price. I will take you anywhere you wish to go. The *Mercator* is a strong ship. Once my crew is cured, the sands of Wycaro will be yours to traverse.”

Madam Asclepius’ weathered face was unmoved. She gestured at her bedridden patient.

“This man washed up in the cyclocane that has been stalking our isle. Your ills pale in comparison to his.”

Lucasia felt a pull at her sleeve. She whipped around, indignant.

“Unhand me!”

From within the flickering shadows, the voice of Madam Asclepius’ patient echoed softly.

“I had a coat like this once.”

Recognition dawned in Lucasia’s eyes. She would know that voice anywhere. As smooth as wyld bour-

bon and deep as the Robrionian Trench. Lucasia lifted a candle from the cold cavern floor... It couldn't be! Yet somehow, it *was*!

Raban!

She gasped, afraid she might wake herself from this dream of dreams.

He was curled on the low cot, shivering. His sweating form was covered in thick, rubbery blankets of mastras-skin. It was not hard for her to imagine the body beneath the covers – she knew every inch of him. Despite his weakened state, Lucasia could not help but notice he was still the devastatingly handsome corsair who possessed her heart. His windswept locks were perfectly tousled, begging for Lucasia to reach out and brush them back from his forehead hot with fever.

She stared at her rogue, words catching in her throat. *Could this really be happening?* The last time she laid eyes on him was when he had gifted her his topcoat, then walked the plank.

Oh, damnable duty! Why must it always come between them? His insouciance had forced her hand. By not heeding her many warnings, he had left her no choice but to order his execution. Rank is

lonely, its demands relentless. She had been too proud to change her mind. Even now, she couldn't let him know how much she cared for him, how her body ached for his touch.

Her cascading emotions coalesced into a single crystalline feeling. One she hadn't allowed herself these many months, one she thought she had learned to live without. Finally, her heart filled with *hope*.

“Raban...? Is it really you?”

Her voice was hoarse with need.

Beside Lucasia, Madam Asclepius looked from one patient to the other with growing curiosity. But Raban merely frowned. When her lover finally spoke, his words pierced Lucasia's battered heart.

“I'm sorry, madame. Have you mistaken me for someone you know...?”

~

About the Author



Carol Sturka is the bestselling creator of the epic fantasy series *Winds of Wycaro*. Her books have received multiple honors, including the Mars & Eros Reader's Choice Award. Sturka's work has been translated into more than two dozen languages and

has earned her devoted fans across the globe. She lives and works in Albuquerque, New Mexico.

Pluribus

This chapter from *Bloodsong of Wycaro*, along with the letter from the author, Carol Sturka, is drawn from the world of the Apple Original series *Pluribus*, created by Vince Gilligan.

In *Pluribus*, the most miserable person on the planet (Carol, played by Rhea Seehorn) must save the world from . . . happiness.

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